# The Interpretation of Music Videos: An Interactive Relationship between Medium and Viewer

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**Abstract**

There is a great deal of evidence to support the examination of an interactive relationship between the medium and the viewer in the interpretation of mainstream media. The exact nature of this relationship, however, is not well understood. The current study was carried out to assess the variables that may help explain why certain people interpret media, such as music videos, differently than others. Jensen's concept of reception analysis describes the relationship between the medium and the audience, and thus remains a strong focus within this study. Differences in the interpretation of music videos were investigated as a function of Absorption, gender role, screen size, age and viewing experience. Multiple regression analyses uncovered independent predictions of sexuality and violence scores by absorption and experience, as well as an interaction between absorption and screen size in the sexuality rating of the music videos.

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## Overview

This study was conducted to assess more clearly the relationship between the medium and the audience and thus, to identify how differential interpretation of media occurs. Preston and Clair (1994) argue that different viewers use a variety of strategies to interpret a particular genre or type of media, which means that one video can be subject to many different interpretations. Morley (1980) argues that, if the same medium can produce different interpretations, it can probably also produce different effects. The possibility that the interaction between the medium and the viewer produces differences in interpretation was examined. Jensen's (1987, 1991) discussion of reception analysis focuses on the interaction between the medium and the viewer. The purpose of this study was to provide a clear picture of the variables that interact to produce differences in interpretation. Perhaps with this knowledge one can pursue the study of how and why different effects of the media occur.

## Introduction

Differences in individual interpretations are primary driving forces behind research in mass communications. It is important to examine why people interpret media differently, because it is the key to understanding how and why media effects occur. Effects research is usually done with explicit media: violent movies, sex on television, sex and violence in music videos, all of which may harm their audience in some way. A commonly reported finding is that media violence is associated with viewers' aggressive behaviour. Every day the popular press tells us about another situation where someone has imitated something he or she saw on television or in a movie. It is important for media researchers to find out why such effects seem to occur, because every day we are faced with large amounts of violence and sexual explicitness in the media. The threat of

censorship is real: music videos, which are like mini-movies providing visual imagery set to music, are often banned from prime-time television for being too explicit (Fisher, Cook & Shirkey, 1994; Gore, 1987).

In order to investigate whether music videos lead to effects in their viewers, some researchers have chosen to examine the specific features of the music videos themselves, such as music video content (i.e., Zillmann & Mundorf, 1987). Different genres of music videos, as well as sexually and violently explicit music videos, regardless of genre have been shown to relate to the most significant effects on the audience. Many researchers have chosen to merely identify instances of sex and violence in the media, and conclude that they have harmful effects (e.g., Greeson, 1991). Simply counting occurrences of explicitness does not tell us anything about what those numbers mean. To fully understand the implications of this information, it is essential to look at the data using a theoretical approach. The emotional content of music videos, particularly sexual and violent imagery, points to a theoretical framework within which to examine this information.

Researchers have tended to focus on both the medium and its content, or the viewer, as accounting for differences in interpretation. Some have suggested that the nature of the medium itself, for example, is what leads to the differences in interpretation; others have tried to show that differences in interpretation are a function of viewer traits. Current research suggests that it is important to examine the interaction between the medium and the audience to see if that is what produces different interpretations (Jensen, 1987; Preston, 1998).

This study has allowed us to assess more clearly the relationship between the medium and the audience and thus to identify what influences or what factors impact the differential interpretation of the media occurs. It is important that this issue be addressed

so as to identify which types of people are most likely to be affected by explicit media. If the same medium can produce different interpretations, it can probably also produce different effects (Morley, 1980). If we can identify what contributes to differences in individual interpretation, we will be closer to understanding how and why media effects occur.

Reception Analysis

Although research has shown that viewer traits and media factors appear to contribute individually to the differences in the interpretation of a medium, little is known about the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the medium in question. It seems possible that the interaction of the two better accounts for differences in interpretation. There is a clear need to uncover the nature of the relationship between the audience and the medium in question, and to this end, reception analysis is used as the theoretical framework that guides the present investigation.

Reception analysis focuses on the relationship between the medium and the audience by emphasizing the role of the "reader" in "decoding" media texts (Lindlof, 1988). One of the keys to uncovering the nature of the viewer/medium interaction is to examine both within the same study. Why is it that different people can watch the same film or television programme, or read the same book, and interpret them in completely different ways? One view is that any mediated experience can have several meanings. In fact, media texts are often viewed as being "polysemic", as containing multiple meanings (Fiske, 1986). The question of exactly where these meanings come from is the subject of various theories, although one possibility could be that the media are "open", or contain an "excess" of meaning (Eco, 1979; Fiske, 1986). That is to say that it may be both the obvious properties of the media as well as the hidden or perhaps ambiguous "bits and pieces" of a medium that lead to different interpretations.

Another possibility for the variation in interpretation is that the interaction between the medium and the viewer produces different interpretations. This idea stems from Jensen's (1987, 1991) discussion on reception analysis, which focuses on the interaction between the communication system and the audience; researchers in this area are studying what is actually going on at the reception site. Reception analysis suggests that it may be this interaction that produces different interpretations (Jensen, 1987, 1991). The main features of reception analysis include the notion of the audience as "reading" the media "texts" and constructing meaning based on their perception of the text. Another feature of reception analysis is the idea of the audience members as forming "interpretive communities", sharing similar codes and frameworks for interpreting the media texts; these groups can sometimes overlap, as some viewers may share some interpretive strategies with members of several groups. Jensen (1991) writes that different audience groups, or interpretive communities, may draw on various interpretive strategies to make sense of a medium, depending on the purpose or context of the reception situation. An important point to note is that reception analysis describes the audience members as active, although some will have more viewing experience than others, which will influence the degree to which membership in the interpretive communities is shared (Lindlof, 1988).

Jensen suggests that to understand communication, we need to look at the context of reception, that is, the actual setting where reception occurs, to find out what the meaning of television viewing is to the audience. V. Fry, Alexander and D. Fry (1990) agree, stating that in order to study meaning, one must examine both media content-centred factors as well as audience-centred factors, because meaning is located in the interaction between the two. Fry et al. (1990) point out that when some researchers are studying the characteristics of the texts, they tend to isolate them from the audiences,

which removes the active role played by the viewer. Simply examining a medium's content does not provide any insight as to how that viewer will interpret it (Blumler, Gurevitch & Katz, 1985; Fejes, 1984; Livingstone, 1990; Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims, 1982). Current research points to the notion of the viewers as those who interact with the media and, as a result, their interpretation may mediate the media's effects (Livingstone 1990; Morley, 1980).

Historically, researchers have tended to place meaning strictly within the message itself, but it is becoming clear that one must take into account the relationship between the audience and the medium (Fiske, 1986; Fry, et al., 1990). Jensen (1987) writes that mass communication can be seen as a "processual" phenomenon, which is produced by certain social practices and through which meaning is produced. That is, the medium not only represents social reality, but also helps to create a version of it. Although the creators of the media may have a certain meaning in mind, often called the "preferred meaning" (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980), the viewers do not necessarily interpret it as such (Wober, 1996; Wober & Gunter, 1987).

The viewers themselves largely determine much of the meaning in a given medium. In fact, it has been shown that television viewers prefer content that is consistent with their personality predispositions (Wober & Gunter, 1987). Wober (1986) wrote that personality would not only influence the viewer's interpretation of media, but also may influence his or her consumption of the media. Livingstone (1990) noted that it is quite possible that the viewers' knowledge, interests and personal needs will affect the media's influence on them. What is important to the individual viewer will cue his or her interest, and will determine how he or she interprets the medium as well as the intended message. Bannister and Fransella (1980) wrote that viewers see a particular television programme through the "goggles" of their representation system, which means that the

same programme is open to any number of different interpretations. It is at this point where the importance of studying differences in individual personality characteristics becomes clear. Preston and Clair (1994) found that personality influences choice of television content, that is, viewers prefer television content that is similar to their perception of self, and that the viewers' psychological processes are "primary in the viewer-television interaction" (Preston & Clair, 1994).

In order to properly analyze the audience, it is important to look not only at demographic categories, but also at specific personality traits of the viewers. Wober (1986) writes that demographics cannot explain the interaction between the perception and the behaviour of the television viewer. Jensen (1987, 1991) agrees that we should not rely on traditional demographic information alone to explain the variations in audience reception. He suggests that instead we think of the viewers as having their own "codes of understanding", as carrying an essential part of the media's message with them, as well as the ability to decipher that message. To argue this point, Jensen uses the example of analyses of television news programming, where the violent content is studied by counting violent instances and correlating them with audience behaviour. He points out that this is often ineffective in determining the audience's reception of the media content, that we need to examine how the viewers are interpreting the media. Jensen believes that by studying the textual layers of a medium, that is the flow of the transfer of information, in combination with the audience responses, we can more effectively analyze audience reception. He writes that the textual layers of a given medium can guide the representation of reality within, and notes that researchers often ignore these layers.

To further illustrate this point, a study by Morley (1980) revealed that viewers "anchor" their interpretations of television news in one of the layers of the narrative, for

example, by choosing one political view over another. He suggests that the meaning of the news text can be reformulated by the viewers; either they may take the "preferred" or intended meaning, they can take a "negotiated" meaning, or an "oppositional" meaning (Morley, 1980). This highlights the "encoding-decoding" model, which describes the way a media message is encoded by the producer vis-à-vis the way it is decoded by the viewer (Hall, 1980).

This study examines music videos because, since their inception in 1985, they have become increasingly popular. The growing number of music video channels on television (MuchMusic, MTV, VH-1, MuchMoreMusic, among others), and the fact that most music stores carry a wide variety of music video compilations for sale, evidences this. Music videos have been studied in the literature, particularly with respect to explicit content, for many years, yet there are few studies using music videos which examine both media characteristics and viewer traits to see if their interaction predicts the interpretation of those videos. When audience factors and media factors have been examined in isolation, each is insufficient in providing an explanation of the interpretation of music videos, failing to take into account the fact that viewing involves simultaneously the medium and the viewer. The description of audience traits such as viewing experience, Absorption, and gender role, as well as media traits such as video type and screen size has, however, provided a starting point for us to examine their relationship and to examine how this may predict the interpretation of music videos.

It is important to examine what the viewers bring to the reception situation before we can begin to understand their interpretations of the videos. Greenfield (1984) writes that there will be individual inferencing, or interpretation with any audio-visual media, and that the viewer must be aware of the medium's "code" in order to cognitively interpret scene changes, or changes in temporal sequence (e.g., flashbacks). In this model, the

viewer remains an active part of the reception process rather than simply a passive vessel witnessing the media experience. It is important that this view be acknowledged, because, as Jensen (1987) points out, the viewers bring an essential part of the media's message with them.

Roberts (1993) writes that any medium essentially provides the viewer with basic material, from which the viewer constructs meaning based on his or her interests and expectations. This means that what the viewer is perceiving is at least partly due to his or her individual interpretation of the structure of the given medium. This interpretation can be based upon several factors such as viewing experience and personality characteristics such as gender role and Absorption level. Grodal (1998) agrees, noting that we will consciously and unconsciously focus on what concerns us most in a given medium. It is important to note that there will be both common and individual meanings in any message. Lindlof (1988) wrote that although each viewer has his or her own interpretation of a given medium, there could also be agreement among different viewers. This is due to the common elements of a particular type of media, which the viewers will often interpret in the same manner. Although no two people will have exactly the same interests, needs, goals, and expectations with regard to the media, there are cultural, societal and age commonalties that will influence the interpretation as well (Grodal, 1998; Jensen, 1987).

This study examined the interaction between music video interpretation and certain personality factors, some of which have been shown in the past to relate individually to music video interpretation in the past (Eden & Preston, 1997). Media factors, such as music video type and screen size, will be studied in relation to viewing experience, gender role, and Absorption level, to help understand what is going on at the reception site and to find out why music videos are interpreted in different ways.

Viewer traits

Many terms are used to describe the audience in media studies. Some use the term "reader" and refer to the medium as the "text" (Fiske, 1986; Fry et al., 1990). For the purposes of this study, the term "viewer" was used to denote the audience is viewing or interpreting the music videos, which was termed the "medium".

Roberts (1993) writes that the effects of the medium depend on both media factors as well as viewer traits. For example, viewers will interpret media differently based on their social, psychological, and physical needs, as well as their expectations about the intended message. Roberts (1993) writes that the "challenge of the conditional approach is to identify theoretically interesting conditions and attributes that will locate differential responses". Media researchers have identified some relevant factors and these will be discussed in turn.

Absorption. Researchers have examined the role of Absorption in the interpretation of explicit media. Absorption refers to both the state and trait of being capable of emotional, cognitive, and attentional immersion in any given experience or medium through a variety of ways, including altered states of consciousness, synaesthesia, vividness, and openness to experience (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) note that the attentional component of Absorption refers to the commitment of one's "perceptual, motoric, imaginative and ideational resources", combining to provide complete focus on the attentional object. The psychological construct of Absorption involves a tendency to process information in unconventional and idiosyncratic ways, as well as a desire and a readiness for affective engagement (Tellegen, 1982). Absorption is a positive experience characterized by the ability to richly elaborate information from the environment (Glicksohn & Avnon, 1997, Hunt, 1989; Hunt, 1995; Preston, 1998; Roche & McConkey, 1990).

Absorption has been touted as an "excellent candidate" in the search to uncover individual differences within experiential involvement, for example in aesthetic experiences (Wild, Kuiken, & Schopflocher, 1995). Absorption can be seen as a combination of both motivational and cognitive factors (Wild et al., 1995). The motivational factors include a willingness for experiential involvement in activities lacking in pressure or coercion, and that lack instrumental goals. Wild et al. (1995) suggest that aesthetic activities may provide an opportunity for the individual to set aside instrumental goals. The cognitive factors of Absorption are defined through the speed of identification of meaningful attentional objects and the continued attention paid to the objects in question. Viewing music videos is an activity that combines the lack of pressure and instrumental goals with imagery. Th is imagery engages the viewer in the selection of and continued attention to the videos, which is another reason video viewing was selected for use in this study.

Individuals differ in the degree of Absorption, and research tends to focus on the distinction between high and low degrees of Absorption. High Absorbers tend to link information to themselves and have a tendency to attribute personal meaning to events that one would not normally consider to be relevant to the individual (Roche & McConkey, 1990). Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) describe the attentional objects as acquiring an "importance and intimacy" akin to that for the self, and therefore the high absorber places a "self-like quality" on the attentional object. Ramonth (1985) describes high Absorbers as committing themselves to the Absorption experience; it is as if the high Absorbers have a willing suspension of disbelief which allows them to achieve the experience of Absorption itself (Bleich, 1984).

High Absorbers also tend to have an image-based and emotional, experiential mental set, which includes an openness to experience imaginal events, as well as the

tendency to dwell on these events so that they become almost effortless. Low Absorbers tend to have a more reality-based, goal-directed, and instrumental set, which encourages them to plan and make thoughtful decisions (Tellegen, 1981). As a result, high Absorbers are better able to use imaginal strategies and richly interpret media using internal cues than are low Absorbers, who are guided by external cues. High Absorbers have been shown to elaborate internal and external events in a multimodal way, which suggests that Absorption itself involves "spontaneous elaboration of a synaesthetic kind" (Rader & Tellegen, 1987).

There may also be a cognitive or emotional personal relationship between the person and the medium in question. As Roche and McConkey (1990) point out, Absorption includes an involvement or engagement in both internal and external events such as music enjoyment and art appreciation (Combs et al., 1988; Rhodes, David, & Combs, 1988; Snodgrass & Lynn, 1989; and Wild et al., 1995). Wild et al. (1995) found that Absorption was positively correlated with participants' judgements of the importance of aesthetic activities such as art, music, and literature within their everyday life. They also found that high Absorbers have cognitive capabilities that allow them to efficiently identify attentional objects, which may suggest that high Absorbers seek out activities that provide them with the opportunity to immerse themselves. Absorption tends to be linked to positive experiences, in that, for high Absorbers, the positive elements in any experience or event will stand out (Preston, 1998).

An illustration of how high and low Absorbers might respond differently to an ambiguous stimulus is found in Grodal's (1998) paper; he uses the analogy of foggy weather scenes in films as encouraging subjective interpretation of those scenes. This is a situation in which high Absorbers would be more likely to use internal cues to interpret and understand the scene, and low Absorbers would feel overwhelmed by the lack of

external cues to guide their focus and understanding. This finding can be linked to the study of music videos, as many music videos are presented in ways that lack structure and linearity. For example, many music videos are subject to post-production techniques such as dream-like and impossible imagery, cross-cutting, and digital video effects such as split screen, nested images, animation and slow motion, among others. These techniques often lead to a shift in temporal order, leading to an altered perception of reality (Aufderheide, 1986; Burns, 1994; Grodal, 1998; and Tapper, Thorson & Black, 1994). Blanchard-Fields, Coon and Mathews (1986) found that there was greater elaborative inferencing, or subjective interpretation, with more ambiguously structured stimuli (in this case, music videos versus prime-time television drama). The observed lack of structure and linearity in music videos can be difficult to interpret for many viewers, especially low Absorbers.

Another finding which supports the view that low Absorbers need external structure while high Absorbers do best without it comes from biofeedback studies done by Qualls and Sheehan (1979, 1981a, 1981b). They found that, when presented with a biofeedback signal, high Absorbers did not perform well on a relaxation task, and, in fact, could only perform well when they were instructed to incorporate the signal into their relaxation strategy. Low Absorbers, on the other hand, performed better on the relaxation task when they used the biofeedback signal, as it guided their performance.

In summary, Absorption may be relevant to music video interpretation because music videos tend to be less structured than other kinds of television programs. What this means relevant to this study is that high Absorbers will use imaginal strategies to guide their interpretations of the music videos, while low Absorbers will use external cues to facilitate their interpretations. This will be seen through lower ratings and counts of sex

and violence for the low Absorbers as compared to high Absorbers because of the lack of obvious visual cues in the music videos to guide their interpretations.

In the case of ratings of sexual content, a second process may affect the ratings of high Absorbers. Specifically, as noted above, high Absorbers tend to elaborate positive experiences, and in general sexuality tends to be viewed positively by most people. Therefore, they may elaborate sexual experiences more than violent experiences. Another way of putting this is that it was hypothesized that not only would Absorption be correlated with ratings of violence and sexuality, but when the relationship with ratings of violence was partialled out, Absorption would continue to be correlated with ratings of sexuality. In contrast, the reverse will not be true. Once the relationship between Absorption and ratings of sexuality is statistically controlled for, no relationship with ratings of violence will remain.

Gender. Gender differences have been reported in the interpretation of music videos. Research has found that music videos are interpreted differently by men than by women, through both the socialization of gender role conventions (Toney & Weaver, 1994) and the creation of different realities and experiences based on these conventions (Brown & Schulze, 1990, Kalof, 1993).

Research on gender differences in the interpretation of music videos typically examines mean video preference differences for men and women. In 1987, Zillmann and Mundorf found that the post-production addition of sexual imagery to music videos increased both men's and women's appreciation of the music, while adding both violent and sexual imagery to the videos decreased their appreciation. In general, men liked sexually and violently explicit videos more than women did, but when explicit images were added to music videos, both men and women enjoyed the sexual imagery, although neither liked the combination of sex and violence. It has also been shown that while both

sexual and violent imagery induce physiological and emotional arousal, only sexual imagery has proven to be appealing (Hansen & Hansen, 1990; Zillmann & Mundorf, 1987). Toney and Weaver (1994) found that men showed greater enjoyment of hard rock music videos than women did, and conversely, women enjoyed the soft rock music videos more than the men did. Hard rock videos tend to include sexual and violent imagery, while soft rock videos tend to fall into the neutral category, not containing any explicit imagery. These results appear to be the norm for music video research; men tend to prefer the more explicit, heavy music videos while women prefer softer, more neutral videos.

It may be possible that differences in the interpretation of music videos extend beyond those accounted for by gender. In 1993 Kalof showed a music video (Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel") which portrayed traditional images of sexuality to both young women and young men, and found not only the usual differences in interpretation between men and women but also different interpretations within each gender as well. This suggests that gender role differentiation may play an important part in the interpretation of music videos, as it may provide a clearer representation of the viewers' personalities than does biological gender.

Gender Role. The relationship between gender role and music videos has been examined in the past. McQuail (1983) wrote that in media studies there is "much evidence of a shared purpose and understanding across [biological] gender lines". It is possible that gender role is the key to this shared understanding and interpretation of media content, and that gender role may provide further insight into the interpretation of music videos. Toney and Weaver (1994) wrote that one's self-perceived gender role may predict media content preference, "in particular, . . . affective reactions toward popular

music". Given that one's preference for media content may be affected by gender role, it seems possible that interpretation may also be affected by gender role.

Jensen (1987) acknowledged that "gender is a complex of meaning that requires depth interpretation in relation to media use". Similarly, McQuail (1983) wrote that it is not the biological sex of its members that defines the audience, but rather that the audience is defined in terms of its gendered experience as male or female. This may mean that it is not necessarily one's biological sex that leads to differences in media interpretations, but it may also be the variations (individual or societal) within one's social reality that accounts for these differences. It is, then, important to study certain individual personality traits such as gender role, to aid in uncovering the differences in media interpretation.

This view is further supported by Toney and Weaver (1994), who argue that it is not necessarily biological gender that influences media use and effects, but that one's gender role characteristics which could predict media content preference or affective reactions toward a given medium. They found that biological gender accounted for only a small amount (20%) of the variance in affective reactions to music videos, and suggested that one's gender role may be a valuable predictor of mass media content choice, "in particular, of affective reactions toward popular music". Toney and Weaver (1994) concluded that more research is needed focusing on other factors that may interact with gender and/or gender role in the study of reactions to music videos. Given these findings, it seems possible that music video interpretation is also guided by gender role. For example, Toney and Weaver (1994) studied the relationship between gender role (and gender) in participants' preferences of music videos. They found that men preferred hard rock and women preferred soft rock, but that gender role did not predict differences in preference. They concluded that, in their study, gender role was likely unrelated

because most of the participants were classified as undifferentiated (according to the Bem Sex Role Inventory), rather than sex typed or cross-sex typed.

There are two issues here. One is a measurement issue that arises when participants are classified into categories. To avoid this issue, the present study used Spence and Helmreich's Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ, 1974, 1978). This questionnaire separately rates degrees of femininity (called Expressivity) and masculinity (called Instrumentality). The gender role dimensions of Expressivity, Instrumentality, and Androgyny are often used to refer to the various gender roles associated with men and women (Kaplan, 1987). The Expressivity trait is associated with characteristics typical of femininity, while the Instrumentality trait is associated with those characteristics related to masculinity. The Androgyny trait represents a balance of masculine and feminine scores (Spence & Helmreich, 1980), and is believed to provide the individual with more flexibility in his or her identity (Markstrom-Adams, 1989). In this study only Expressivity and Instrumentality were examined because these are the dimensions most frequently addressed in the literature. It is important to note that the PAQ does not define specific behaviours of an individual, but rather his or her dispositional properties (O'Neil, Egan, Owen & Murry, 1993).

The second issue is that University samples may be largely androgynous and therefore show little variability in gender role, no matter how it is measured. To the extent this is the case, a study would have to obtain a "real world" sample, something that is beyond the scope of this research.

Whereas Toney and Weaver (1994) focussed on emotional reactions to video content, the present study instead examines perceptions of sexuality and violence. There is reason to predict that gender role will be related to Absorption and, therefore, related to perceptions of sexuality and violence. High Absorbers have an emotional

mental set, which authors in the gender role literature regard as a typically Expressive trait. Low Absorbers are more goal-directed and have an instrumental mental set, which are traits associated with Instrumentality. Based on this, it was predicted that Expressivity scores would be positively correlated with Absorption scores while Instrumentality would be negatively related. If this proves to be the case, then the same kinds of relationships hypothesized between Absorption and ratings and tallies of sex and violence should be found with Expressivity and Instrumentality. In addition, the possibility that there would be an interaction between Absorption and Expressivity and Instrumentality was be explored.

Viewing experience. Television studies show a relationship between the amount of viewing and the viewers' understanding of genre conventions (Eden & Preston, 1997). For example, Preston and Cull (1998) found that experienced participants performed better on spatial navigation tasks because they were better able to focus on relevant information than inexperienced participants.

Researchers have investigated the role of viewing experience in the interpretation of mainstream videos. Mainstream music videos are those which are considered to be currently popular. The studies have found that frequent viewers have a greater understanding of the conventions and the content of music videos, and are less likely to rate them extremely than infrequent viewers. That is, those viewers with more experience watching music videos are likely to be familiar with seeing violent and sexual imagery portrayed in mainstream music videos. They may therefore be less likely to interpret them in terms of social realism, but more likely to interpret them as reflecting mood. Infrequent viewers, on the other hand, are less familiar with the imagery found within many music videos, and therefore tend to interpret them as explicit.

A study by Small and Preston (1998) found that after viewing videos containing instances of violence and sexuality, experienced video viewers show more detail and length in their definitions of sexuality and violence than inexperienced viewers. This suggests that experienced viewers may have a richer understanding of the meaning of the videos. Greeson (1991) studied high school students and found that those who watched MTV (Music Television, a US music video channel) more often rated explicit music videos more favourably than did those who did not watch MTV as frequently. In fact, the videos' positive ratings increased, along with the viewers' MTV viewing experience. Greeson (1991) also reported that younger viewers preferred explicit videos more than the older viewers did. It is important to note that music videos are directed towards a teenage audience who watch 2 to 3 hours of music videos per week, therefore younger viewers (i.e., teenagers) tend to be more experienced viewers (Greeson, 1991).

Eden and Preston (1997) showed nine mainstream music videos to 168 undergraduate university students and measured their ratings and counts of sex and violence in the videos. They reported that inexperienced viewers gave higher counts and ratings of sex and violence in music videos than did experienced viewers. The inexperienced viewers were also older (20 years or older), and scored lower for Instrumentality and Androgyny than the experienced viewers. (Incidentally, this finding gives further support to the hypothesis made above that Instrumentality will be negatively related to ratings of violence and sexuality). These findings are relevant to the present study, and suggest that there will be differences between experienced and inexperienced viewers with respect to the interpretation of videos. Experienced music video viewers should be familiar with seeing violent and sexual imagery portrayed in music videos, and interpret the imagery in the context of mood. Inexperienced viewers have had less exposure to sexual and violent imagery and are therefore likely to interpret more explicit

elements as social reality. It was hypothesized that experienced viewers would count fewer instances of sex and violence in the videos than inexperienced viewers, and experienced viewers would also rate the music videos as lower in sex and violence than inexperienced viewers. Consistent with Eden and Preston (1997), the experienced viewers should also be younger, while the inexperienced viewers should be older, and, therefore, it was also hypothesized that comparable relationships to ratings and tallies of sex and violence would be found with age. However, there is no reason to hypothesize an independent relationship between age and perceptions of sexuality and violence beyond what would be predicted from experience in watching videos; nonetheless, this possibility will be explored.

Media variables

It is well known that features of the medium affect viewers. By far one of the most researched topics in media studies includes the study of explicit media, in particular, music videos. In fact, violent and sexual imagery in the media have been the focus of critical attention and research for many years (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Gross, 1979; Kunkel et al., 1995; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Walker, 1987).

Music Videos. As noted above, music videos were selected for this study for a number of reasons. First of all, they are popular and therefore have a significant presence in our culture. Music videos provide visual imagery set to music, often blending commercial and artistic images to promote a new song by a band. In fact, many describe music videos as advertisements for bands, albums, or movies, while others argue that they are products in themselves (Burns, 1994).

Second, the characteristics of music videos are such that it is reasonable to predict that the trait of Absorption will affect how this medium is "received" (in the

language of Jensen's reception analysis). As further examples of these characteristics, Aufderheide (1986) describes music videos as "primary experiences" which create and trigger moods and emotions, offering a "ready-made alternative to social life". Kinder (1984) writes that music videos are similar to dreams in that we have unlimited access to both. Music videos provide a structural discontinuity much like dreams do, and both assume or suggest the omnipresence of the spectator. She also writes that music videos have the power to imprint imagery in the memory of the viewer, retrieved upon hearing the same song in a different context . Goodwin (1992) agrees, noting that the imagery evoked in the viewer by music videos may be triggered by either mass media imagery or by personal memory.

What remains to be discussed is what types of music videos were selected for this study and why. There are different types of music videos commonly studied in the literature: both sexually and violently explicit music videos have been shown to lead to the most significant effects on the audience.

What constitutes explicit content? In terms of "explicitness", it is essential to interpret media within the context of the social communication system that produced it (Rogers, 1985). Jensen (1987) writes that the interpretation of the meaning of a given medium may be patterned by the "social uses the conventional genres suggest". He, too, believes that one cannot study a medium without looking at the influence of social and historical context. An illustration of social context influencing the interpretation of music videos can be found in Madonna's "Papa Don't Preach" video. The protagonist, played by the singer, portrays a single young girl who has become pregnant and is telling her father that she is going to keep the baby. This video was extremely controversial when it was released in 1986 (Brown & Schulze, 1990), but by today's (1999) standards, the imagery and narrative are comparatively less shocking than some of the music videos

being produced today, an example of which is LL Cool J's "Phenomenon". What was considered to be sexually or violently explicit imagery even as little as five years ago, is no longer so. This is relevant to the generalizability of the expected results of this study in that, as society's tolerance level for explicit imagery grows, the producers of music videos are becoming more explicit in their portrayals of sexuality and violence. A quick glance at the videos shown on prime time on the Canadian video channel, MuchMusic, will confirm this. The videos intended for study in this case are presently considered to be explicit, but in as little as two or three years' time, may be as "tame" as the Madonna video mentioned above. It is important to acknowledge this shift in social perception of what is considered explicit, as future research must take it into account when studying any form of explicit media. It is also important to note that violent and sexually suggestive music videos have been found to be interpreted differently from neutral music videos (Gow, 1990; Greeson, 1991; Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Zillmann & Mundorf, 1987). Many researchers choose to include a neutral set of videos to ensure that the effects they measure are not a result of video presentation order, expectancy bias or other such confounds, as does the present study.

The operational definitions of sex and violence differ among these studies, so one must be cautious in interpreting the results and applying them to real world situations. Spracklin and Preston (1997) examined 210 mainstream videos and found that those that contained sexual imagery portrayed mainly suggestive rather than explicit imagery. They also found that the violent videos rarely depicted explicit violent imagery. For the purposes of this study, music videos which are defined as violently explicit will include both personal violence and violence or damage to property. The sexually explicit music videos will be those that include both erotic and purely sexual imagery. Erotic

imagery refers to suggestive innuendos of sexual imagery, not the explicit acts themselves.

The inclusion of violent content. Implicit in the above discussion is the fact that, for the purposes of this study, it was decided to include both violent and sexual content in the video selection. While other studies have examined violent versus sexual videos, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine this issue. However, by including both types of videos, it was possible to consider the interaction of personality and perceptions of violence versus sexuality.

In general, violent content was included because it has been the focus of considerable public debate. Some people believe that violent media have no effect on their viewers, while others insist that violence in the media causes or is a catalyst for aggression. Sometimes the reactions are biased due to professional differences. For example, teacher, parent and child advocacy groups as well as religious groups strongly and loudly oppose any explicit imagery in the media, and fight to censor it (Gore, 1987). Advocates in this area often cite one-of-a-kind effects from television, music or movies. For example, in the US a 9-year old boy burned down his family's home, supposedly after viewing a "Beavis and Butthead" programme where the two main characters set things on fire (Bok, 1998; Wekesser, 1995). What was not mentioned in the article, however, is that the child's family did not own a television, nor had the child ever seen the programme. This type of (often false) anecdotal evidence tends to exaggerate the singular cases of media effects, while the majority of the population may remain unaffected. The bias of media effects research goes the other way as well, as we see television network representatives and media executives firmly claim that research has not been able to prove any such negative effects (McGuire, 1986; Wekesser, 1995).

Media critics often speak of the massive effects of media violence, yet as McGuire (1986) points out, massive effects are not necessarily important ones. The public eye tends to focus on the few who act as a consequence of media violence and ignores the multitudes that do not. McGuire (1986) concludes that effects research does not support a massive impact model, and argues that one of the reasons this notion continues to persist among the popular press and some researchers is because we tend to notice change, not stability. This means that the obvious consequences of media (as opposed to what does not happen) are what stand out. Roberts (1993) agrees, noting that the notion of a massive impact model fails to take into account differences among viewers.

Walker (1987) notes that the violence observed in music videos is similar to violence in other types of media such as police dramas, cartoons, news programs, as well as films. He argues that music video violence should not be studied in isolation, and that the effects of mass media that many talk about (Gore, 1987 and Sherman & Dominick, 1986, among others) come from regular exposure to violent imagery from many sources, over a long period of time (Walker, 1987). It is interesting to note that the programs that contain the highest counts of violence (i.e., cartoons) are not rated as violent by the viewers (Howitt & Cumberbatch, 1975). Roberts (1993) writes that it is counterproductive to examine the massive effects of media violence, and concludes that individual audience differences are largely overlooked when examining these massive effects. Individual differences in reception must be acknowledged in order to help determine any causal relationships.

The inclusion of sexual content. Why the decision to include videos with sexual content? While violence has received a great deal of popular attention, it is common to study sexual and violent media together. Roberts (1993) writes that the same viewer

traits that mediate responses and interpretations of media violence also "operate in relation to media portrayals of male and female interactions", as well as other types of media content. Moreover, gender differences in preference for music video content with respect to sexual and violent content have been found in the literature (Hansen & Hansen, 1990; Hansen & Krygowski, 1994; Zillmann & Mundorf, 1987). Sexually explicit media have been shown to have an effect on some viewers; however, the popular press tends to focus on the violent, rather than sexual media. Even though the popular press suggests that violent music videos have the most serious effects on their audience, some studies suggest that sexually explicit videos may be relevant to the study of differential interpretation, especially when we are assessing gender role as a potential predictor of that interpretation.

Although research has shown that instances of sexuality and violence in music videos are common, the definitions of sexual and violent imagery differ from study to study, as do the videos chosen for examination. The US National Coalition on Television Violence reported in 1984 that 40% of the videos studied depicted one episode of violence, and at least 30% of those had sexually related violence (Gow, 1990). Another study found similar results, identifying violence in over 50% of the videos studied (Baxter, DeRiemer, Landini, Leslie & Singletary, 1985). Sherman and Dominick (1986) observed an average of 2.86 violent acts per video (n=291) across three different video networks, including MTV, and a mean of 4.78 sexual acts per video (n=680) across the same three networks. Sherman and Dominick (1986) also found that, of the music videos which contained violence, 81% also contained sexual imagery. They observed that the sexual imagery was more implied than overt, and concluded that music videos are violent and "laden with sexual content" (Sherman & Dominick, 1986). The results of this study may have been affected by this combination of sex and violence, which is why in the present

study the music videos contained either sexual or violent imagery, not a combination of the two.

Screen size. Screen size has been demonstrated to have an effect on media interpretation in the past. In 1980, Hatada, Sakata and Kusaka observed the creation of a stronger sense of reality with larger (taller and wider) screens. Those participants watching a larger screen enjoyed the viewing experience more and showed more physiological arousal than those who did not (Detenber & Reeves, 1996; Lombard, Reich, Grabe, Campanella & Ditton, 1995). Lombard (1995) observed greater positive emotional reactions to television news broadcasters when viewed on a larger screen. This type of reaction is termed "direct" because the viewers are responding not only to the coded meanings in television, but also to what they see in that mediated environment (i.e., the portrayal of people and events on television) as they would to the actual events or people themselves (Lombard, 1995).

Detenber and Reeves (1996) suggest that a larger screen may help people respond to the images on the screen as though they were natural by portraying the images as more vivid. As size is an important cue to distance, the images and the people on a larger screen appear closer to the viewer. Reeves, Lombard and Melwani (1992) reported that participants gave more attention to the people on the larger screen when presented with a secondary reaction time task. They concluded that the physical arrangements between the viewer and the viewing screen "can alter fundamental psychological responses to people on the screen" (Reeves, Lombard & Melwani, 1992).

Prothero, Hoffman, Parker, Furness and Wells (undated website) reported that participants' ratings of presence, or Absorption were increased as peripheral distractions were decreased. The use of a large projection screen and low illumination in the room

reduced peripheral cues and aided the participant in feeling a stronger sense of Absorption (also see Detenber & Reeves, 1996).

If screen size has the effect of facilitating Absorption, then presumably it would have more impact on low Absorbers than high. Therefore, it was hypothesized that there would be an interaction between screen size and Absorption in predicting perceptions of violence and sexuality. As part of the current research therefore, two screen sizes were used: some participants viewed the videos on a 27-inch display monitor while others watched them on a 7'x7' projection screen. The larger screen should produce higher ratings and tallies for sex and violence within the videos. The final hypothesis was that those participants who viewed the music videos on the 7'x7' projection screen would provide higher ratings and tallies for sex and violence than those who viewed them on a 27-inch monitor.

Summary of Hypotheses

This research was concerned with the impact of videos on viewers. Such impact is understood, through the theory of reception analysis, to be a function of the interaction between viewer traits and media characteristics. For the purposes of this study, "impact" was operationally defined as perception of violence and of sexuality in video content. From a review of the literature the following hypotheses were made:

1. Absorption would be positively correlated with perceptions of sexuality and violence as measured by both event tallies and ratings.
2. This relationship would be stronger for sexuality than violence given Absorbers' propensity to particularly notice positive events over negative. Therefore, it was anticipated that a significant relationship would be obtained between Absorption and perceptions of sexuality after partialling out perceptions of violence; however, the reverse would not be obtained. (i.e., when statistically controlling for perceptions of

sexuality, there would be no relationship between Absorption and perceptions of violence).

3. Absorption would positively correlate with Expressivity as measured by the PAQ and would negatively correlate with Instrumentality. If such relationships are indeed found, it was expected that corresponding relationships to those predicted between Absorption and perceptions of sexuality and violence would be obtained with Expressivity (in the same direction) and Instrumentality (in the reverse direction). The possibility that there may be independent relationships between Expressivity and perceptions of sexuality and violence and between Instrumentality and perceptions of sexuality and violence was explored. Moreover the possibility that Absorption and Expressivity and Instrumentality may interact to affect perceptions of sexuality and violence was also explored.
4. There would be negative correlations between experience in watching videos (measured in hours per week) and perceptions of sexuality and violence. Age of participant would be negatively correlated with experience and therefore would be related in the reverse direction to perceptions of sexuality and violence. It was not expected that age would have any relation with such perceptions independent of its shared variance with experience; however, this was explored.
5. Those participants who viewed the music videos on the 7' X 7' projection screen would have higher counts and ratings for sex and violence than those who viewed the videos on a 27" monitor. This effect would be particularly true of low Absorbers.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were male (n=34) and female (n=36) volunteers from the undergraduate population at Brock University. They were recruited through posters

placed throughout the university that asked for volunteers to participate in a "Music Video Study". The age range of the participants was from 17 to 35 years, with a mean age of 22.6.

Apparatus

The music videos were displayed on videotape, played on a VCR with a 27" display monitor television set. For the 7'x7' screen condition the videos were projected using an overhead video displayer.

Measures

Tellegen's Absorption Scale (TAS). The Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen, 1976) is a 34-item scale that is widely used as a measure of openness to absorbing and self-altering experiences (see Figure 1). The TAS assesses one's ability to become involved in experiences that are triggered by both external and internal (imaginal) stimuli. The Absorption score is the number of times the participants choose "true" versus "false" to answer the Absorption questions, such as "I sometimes step outside my usual self and experience an entirely different state of being", or "I can be greatly moved by eloquent or poetic language". The psychometric properties of the TAS are quite strong; in 1982 Tellegen reported an internal reliability of r=.88 and a test-retest reliability of r-.91 (Roche & McConkey, 1990).

Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). The Personal Attributes Questionnaire was developed by Spence and Helmreich (1974) to measure gender role identity. Twenty PAQ items were used, including eight Instrumental (masculine) items, eight Expressive (feminine) items. Each item consists of two contradictory characteristics, such as "very artistic" and "not at all artistic", with the letters A to E forming a 5-point scale between the two extremes. The Instrumentality score is the sum of the scores from the masculine questions, the Expressivity score is the sum of the scores of the feminine

questions. Spence and Helmreich (1978) reported Cronbach's alphas of .85 (Masculine items), and .82 (Feminine).

Stimulus materials: Music Videos

The music videos used in this study were supplied by the major label distributors of the specific music artists (e.g., EMI, Universal, Warner, Sony). The distributors supplied a variety of videos considered by the music industry and the popular press to be explicit, as well as some considered to be neutral (lacking in sex and violence). The researcher and two raters (one male, one female) viewed all music videos and chose the nine videos to be used.

The videos were categorized by the researcher and the two other raters as either neutral (no sexual imagery, no violent imagery), sexual (mainly sexual imagery) or violent (mainly violent imagery). The videos categorized as sexual or violent may have contained instances of both, but the primary overtone of the video determined its category. The raters used the following criteria to determine to which category the videos belonged: violently explicit videos included both personal violence and violence or damage to property, while sexually explicit videos included purely sexual as well as erotic imagery, which contains suggestions or innuendos of sexual imagery, as opposed to explicit acts themselves (from Eden & Preston, 1997; Spracklin & Preston, 1997). See Appendix A for the list of videos used in this study.

The videos chosen are similar to what one would consider being "mainstream" music videos. Toney and Weaver (1994) suggest that the use of gender role as a tool for understanding media interpretations is connected to the "novelty of the media experience". The videos chosen are a reflection of what is currently seen on the popular music video television channels, although the specific videos themselves are not often

played on these channels. It is therefore unlikely that either the experienced or the inexperienced viewers will have seen the videos used in this study.

Design and Procedure

This study was conducted in accordance with the rules of the University Committee on Ethics for Research with Human Participants, and all participants were treated within the guidelines of the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association.

Upon arrival at the experimental session, the participants were greeted by the experimenter and were asked to complete informed consent forms. They were given a questionnaire detailing their demographic information and video viewing history in which they were asked to rate their hours per week of video watching. They were asked whether or not they have access to a television that carries a music video channel such as MTV or MuchMusic, and whether or not they have a choice of what to watch. The participants were then given the Tellegen Absorption Scale, followed by the Personal Attributes Questionnaire.

In order to reduce any presentation order effects, the nine videos were shown in a counterbalanced order to produce six conditions (ABC,ACB,BAC,BCA,CAB,CBA), where A represents the three sexual videos, B represents the three neutral videos and C represents the three violent videos. The participants were systematically assigned to one of six groups, until an approximately equal number were in each condition. Half of the participants watched the videos on a 27-inch display monitor and the other half on a 7' x 7' projection screen. They viewed the videos in a darkened room in groups of five to ten people, and sat 5-10 feet from the viewing screen.

Following the procedure used by Eden and Preston (1997), the participants were asked to keep a separate running tally of instances of sexual and/or violent imagery while

the videos were playing (from Eden & Preston, 1997). They were then asked to rate the videos for violence and sex on a scale of 1 (low violence or sex) to 7 (high violence or sex). After the last video was played, the participants were asked to rank the videos in order from the one they liked the most (1) to the one they liked the least (9). Participants were also asked to rank order the music videos for preference.

## Results

The intent of this study was to assess the variables that may help explain why certain people interpret music videos differently than others. Differences in the interpretation of music videos were investigated as a function of Absorption, gender role, screen size, age and viewing experience.

### Preliminary Analyses

Concurrence between Judges' and Participants' Ratings of Video Content. The intent of the study was to provide a range of video content. Table 1 shows participant ratings and tallies by video type. To test whether the groups of videos were significantly different, ratings and tallies were summed across the video types producing separate scores for neutral, sexual and violent videos. Four one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were then calculated comparing the three video types on participants' sexual ratings, sexual tallies, violence ratings and violence tallies.

Table 1. Concurrence between Judges' and Participants' Ratings of Video Content.

| **Judges' Classification** | **Participants' Ratings (M, (sd))** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sexual Rating (SD) | Sexual Tally (SD) | Violence Rating (SD) | Violence Tally (SD) |
| **Neutral Videos:** | | | | |
| Video 1 | 1.0 (.12) | 0.2 (.87) | 1.0 (.24) | 0.0 (.20) |
| Video 2 | 1.2 (.48) | 1.0(3.64) | 1.0(0.00) | 0.1 (.23) |
| Video 3 | 1.1 (.30) | 0.5(2.61) | 1.0(0.00) | 0.0 (.20) |
| **Sexual Videos:** | | | | |
| Video 1 | 4.1(1.76) | 5.3 (3.45) | 2.1(1.15) | 2.6 (3.62) |
| Video 2 | 5.5(1.46) | 13.2(21.70) | 1.4 (.58) | 1.3 (1.63) |
| Video 3 | 5.8(1.56) | 14.8(15.68) | 1.8 (.86) | 2.3 (2.41) |
| **Violent Videos:** | | | | |
| Video 1 | 1.7(1.15) | 1.6(2.51) | 5.5(1.6) | 11.4 (6.49) |
| Video 2 | 2.0(1.20) | 2.6(2.70) | 4.6(2.0) | 6.7 (5.00) |
| Video 3 | 1.7(1.19) | 1.5(5.27) | 4.3(2.0) | 7.6 (9.30) |

n=70

The means for each group of videos and corresponding F values are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. ANOVAs Comparing Three Groups of Videos (Neutral, Sexual, Violent)

| **Dependent Variable** | **Group Means (sd)** | | | **F** | **p** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Neutral** | **Sexual** | **Violent** | | |
| Sexual Ratings | 3.3 (0.65) | 15.5 (4.03) | 5.5 (2.78) | 432.81 | .0001 |
| Sexual Tallies | 1.8 (6.90) | 33.2 (39.12) | 5.8 (9.31) | 57.20 | .0001 |
| Violence Ratings | 3.0 (0.24) | 5.3 (1.83) | 14.3 (4.57) | 330.62 | .0001 |
| Violence Tallies | 0.1 (0.57) | 6.2 (5.49) | 25.8 (18.42) | 130.13 | .0001 |

Not only were all ANOVAs highly significant, but all possible comparisons between pairs of groups were significantly different with one exception: neutral and violent videos did not differ significantly on sexual tallies. Although participants were asked to rate their preference for music videos used within this study, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine this data.

Combining Tallies and Ratings to Form Composite Scores. Given the relatively small sample size, it was deemed desirable to reduce the number of dependent measures. Moreover, the fact that both tallies and ratings successfully distinguished between video types suggests that they may be testing the same trait or factor. To examine this possibility, participants' scores across all nine videos were summed to yield a single score for sexual rating, sexual tally, violence rating and violence tally. These four scores were then correlated (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix for Sexual and Violence Ratings and Tallies

| | Violence Ratings | Violence Tallies | Sexual Ratings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Violence Ratings | | | |
| Violence Tallies | .44* | | |
| Sexual Ratings | .54* | .36* | |
| Sexual Tallies | .14 | .77* | .41* |

n=70

*p<.05 (2-tailed)

There is an obvious effect for method of measurement: highly significant correlations were obtained between ratings of violence and tallies of violence, and similarly, between ratings and tallies of sexuality. Nonetheless, ratings of violence were correlated with tallies of violence which would justify combining tallies with ratings. Therefore, given there is no means to determine which is more valid, ratings or tallies, it was decided to convert both to z scores and sum them to produce Composite Sexual and Composite Violence scores. Hereafter, only these two scores were used.

Order effects

The order of video presentation was counterbalanced to avoid potential order effects such as a higher rating of sex by those viewers having seen the sexual videos last. To examine whether there were any order effects, two one-way ANOVAs were calculated on the composite Sexuality and Violence scores. These were not significant (F values of 1.00 and 0.68 respectively).

The relationship of Absorption to Perceptions of Sexuality and Violence

It was predicted that Absorption would be correlated with both perceptions of sexuality and violence. As can be seen in Table 4 this hypothesis was supported.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix Among Key Variables

| | Viol. Tot. | Sex Tot. | Absorp. | Express. | Instrument. | Exper. | Age | SSize |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Viol. Tot. | | | | | | | | |
| Sex Tot. | .64* | | | | | | | |
| Absorp. | .35* | .41* | | | | | | |
| Express. | .31* | .34* | .57* | | | | | |
| Instru. | -.26* | .03 | -.34* | -.29* | | | | |
| Exper. | -.46* | -.39* | -.29* | -.29* | .20 | | | |
| Age | .27* | .21 | .08 | .06 | -.08 | -.33* | | |
| SSize | .30* | -.02 | -.11 | -.07 | -.31* | -.16 | .26* | |

*$p < .05$ (2-tailed)

n=70

It was also hypothesized that the correlation between Absorption and Sexuality would be significant after partialling out Violence, but that the reverse would not be true. This hypothesis was also supported. The partial correlation between Absorption and Sexuality after partialling violence was .26 ($p < .05$) while the partial correlation between Absorption and Violence was only .13, which was not significant.

Expressivity, Instrumentality and Absorption

It was hypothesized that Absorption would be positively correlated with Expressivity and negatively correlated with Instrumentality. Both hypotheses were supported (see Table 4). It was further hypothesized that if such relationships were obtained, then Expressivity would correlate with Sexuality and violence while Instrumentality would negatively correlate with them. As shown in Table 4, Expressivity

did correlate positively with both measures; however, Instrumentality was only negatively correlated with Violence.

To explore whether either Expressivity or Instrumentality had an independent relationship with perceptions of sexuality or violence, apart from Absorption, and to explore whether Absorption interacts with Instrumentality and Expressivity in the prediction of perceptions of sexuality and violence, two multiple regression analyses were conducted (one for the Sexual Composite and one for the Violence Composite) first entering Absorption, then Expressivity and Instrumentality as a block, then the interaction terms between Absorption and Expressivity and Absorption and Instrumentality. As can be seen from Tables 5 and 6, Expressivity, Instrumentality and the interaction terms did not significantly increase $R^2$.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Predicting Violence.

| **Step** | **Variables Entered** | **Change in $R^2$** | **(df) F for Change** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Absorption | .13 | (1,68) 9.72** |
| 2 | Expressivity | | |
| | Instrumentality | .04 | (2,66) 1.46 |
| 3 | Absorption*Expressivity | | |
| | Absorption*Instrumentality | .01 | (2,64) .54 |

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 6. Multiple Regression Predicting Sexuality.

| Step | Variables Entered | Change in $R^2$ | (df) F for Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Absorption | .26 | (1,68) 14.10** |
| 2 | Expressivity | | |
| | Instrumentality | .05 | (2,66) 1.48 |
| 3 | Absorption*Expressivity | | |
| | Absorption*Instrumentality | .06 | (2,64) 2.63 |

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

The Relationship of Experience and Age to Perceptions of Violence and Sexuality

It was hypothesized that experience would be negatively correlated with perceptions of sexuality and violence in the music videos. As indicated in Table 4, this hypothesis was supported. In addition, it was also predicted that age and experience would be negatively related, and this was found to be true, $r$ (68) = -.33. Given this relationship, it was expected that age would positively correlate with sexuality and violence. While both numbers were in the predicted direction (see Table 4), only the relationship with violence was significant.

To explore whether there was an independent relationship between age and perceptions of sexuality and violence, partial correlations were calculated, controlling for experience. These were not significant ($r$=.10 and .14, respectively for sexuality and violence). In contrast, when partial correlations were calculated for experience, controlling for age, these were significant (-.35 and -.41 respectively both $p < .01$ for sexuality and violence).

Screen Size and Perceptions of Sexuality and Violence

It was hypothesized that participants watching videos on a large screen would report higher scores on sexuality and violence than participants watching the videos on a standard monitor. Moreover, it was hypothesized that this effect would be particularly strong for low Absorbers. To test these hypotheses, two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted, first entering screen size, then Absorption and then the interaction term between screen size and Absorption.

As evident in Table 7, only Screen Size and Absorption significantly contributed to the prediction of Violence; however, for sexuality only Absorption and the interaction term were significant (see Table 8). A plot of the interaction (see Figure 1) indicates that as predicted, only low Absorbers have higher ratings as a result of viewing videos on a large screen.

Table 7. Multiple Regressions Predicting Violence.

| **Step** | **Variables Entered** | **Change in $R^2$** | **(df) F for Change** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Screen Size | .09 | (1,68) 6.59* |
| 2 | Absorption | .15 | (1,67) 13.31** |
| 3 | Screen Size*Absorption | .00 | (1,66) 0.30 |

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

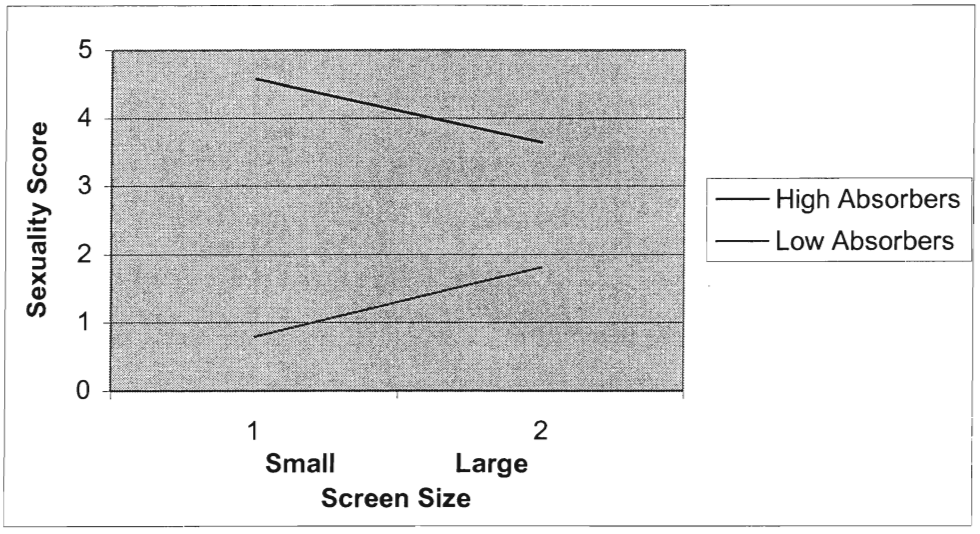
Table 8. Multiple Regressions Predicting Sexuality.

| Step | Variables Entered | Change in $R^2$ | (df) F for Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Screen Size | .00 | (1,68) 0.02 |
| 2 | Absorption | .17 | (1,67) 13.94** |
| 3 | Screen Size*Absorption | .06 | (1,66) 4.63* |

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Figure 1. Interaction between Screen Size and Absorption predicting Sexuality scores




## Discussion

This study was conducted to assess more clearly the relationship between the medium and the audience and thus, to identify how differential interpretation of media occurs. The possibility that the interaction between the medium and the viewer produces

differences in interpretation was examined. Jensen's (1987, 1991) discussion of reception analysis focuses on the interaction between the medium and the viewer.

In the present study, results revealed a tremendous variability in participants' ratings of the same videos, as evident in the descriptive statistics. This is an indication that there are great differences in how these materials are received, and that the viewer may be applying his or her own "codes of understanding" to the interpretation (Jensen, 1987, 1991). Viewers bring with them a variety of personality factors, which aid in the interpretation of the music videos. Roberts (1993) writes that any medium provides the viewer with basic material, from which the viewer constructs meaning based on his or her interests and expectations. This means that what the viewer is perceiving is at least partly due to his or her individual interpretation of the structure of the given medium.

The preliminary analyses indicated that there was strong method variance as evidenced by the large correlations between tallies and ratings of different constructs. This indicates a problem with the discriminant validity of these measures. Essentially, people have a personal style when doing tallies and when rating video content. As a result, tallies of one item correlate with tallies of other items, even when the two items have nothing in common, such as sex and violence. Perhaps one solution in future research would be to abandon ratings and instead use tallies but along with the tallies provide careful instruction as to what constitutes sexuality, violence. Clearly work needs to be done on how to validly measure people's perceptions of videos. Nonetheless, these ratings did differentiate between different types of videos suggesting they retain some validity as measures of perception of sexuality and violence.

High Absorbers tend to use imaginal strategies to interpret media, while low Absorbers use external cues. Also, for high Absorbers, the positive elements in any experience or event will stand out (Presto, 1998), which suggests that they may elaborate

sexual experiences more than violent experiences. Thus it was hypothesized that Absorption would be positively correlated with ratings of violence and sexuality, but when the relationship with ratings of violence was partialled out, Absorption would continue to be correlated with ratings of sexuality. It was also hypothesized that once the relationship between Absorption and ratings of sexuality is statistically controlled for, no relationship with ratings of violence would remain. It was, therefore, predicted in the second hypothesis that the relationship between Absorption and perceptions of sexuality would be stronger than the relationship between Absorption and violence, as sexuality is generally more appealing than violence. These predictions were confirmed, lending support to the idea that there may, in fact, be a second process at work with high Absorbers allowing them to elaborate positive experiences more so than negative ones.

While in the past many researchers have used biological sex to measure differences in music video preference, the present study measured the relationship between gender role dimensions, Absorption and the interpretation of music videos. It is known that high Absorbers possess traits that are typically Expressive, such as an emotional mental set, while low Absorbers tend to have a more instrumental mental set. For this reason we predicted that Absorption would positively correlate with Expressivity and would negatively correlate with Instrumentality. This hypothesis was also supported. These findings are significant because they open the door for future work in gender role research, particularly with the interpretation of all types of mainstream media, including virtual reality.

We also examined the possibility that independent relationships existed between Expressivity and perceptions of sexuality and violence and between Instrumentality and sexuality and violence, as well as whether Absorption and Expressivity and Instrumentality would interact to affect perceptions of sexuality and violence. After

entering Absorption in the prediction of sexuality and violence, no further relationship existed with gender role either as a main effect or as an interaction with Absorption. These data suggest that the relationship between gender role and perceptions of sexuality and violence may at least in part be due to differences in attentional style associated with a feminine versus masculine orientation, specifically, that people with an Expressive style tend to have characteristics related to femininity, and those with an Instrumental style tend to have characteristics typical of masculinity. As both Absorption and gender role individually predict perceptions of sexuality and violence, it is difficult to identify which process or feature is primary to media interpretation. Future research with a larger sample size might help further identify the relationship between these viewer traits and the interpretation of the media.

Researchers have found that people with more experience in watching music videos tend to be more familiar with the sexual and violent imagery found in mainstream music videos, such as those used in this study (Eden & Preston, 1997). Our hypothesis that there would be negative correlations between experience in watching music videos and perceptions of sexuality and violence was also supported. This finding supports the belief that frequent viewers have a greater understanding of the conventions and content of mainstream media such as music videos, and are less likely to rate them extremely than infrequent viewers. It is important to note that the present study did not address viewers' media preferences, but suggests that future research should address viewer preferences.

Research has also shown that experienced viewers tend to be younger (Greeson, 1991). Based on this information, it was also hypothesized that the participants' age would be negatively correlated with experience and would therefore be related in the reverse direction to perceptions of sexuality and violence. Both of these

relationships were confirmed. Although the sample was made up of a University population, these findings are significant because they do speak to the public's concerns that explicit media is harmful to young viewers. Clearly the younger viewers in this study had the most experience watching music videos, and were those who rated the videos as containing less sexuality and violence. Some may interpret this to mean that younger, more experienced viewers are desensitized to the explicit imagery, but that conclusion is not examined here. It would be interesting to know how viewer traits such as Absorption and gender role relate to the viewer's age and viewing experience in the interpretation of music videos. Future research should examine the relationship between age, Absorption and gender role with respect to the interpretation of mainstream media.

Our final hypothesis was that those participants who watched the music videos on the 7'x7' projection screen would have higher counts and ratings for sex and violence than those who watched the videos on the 27" monitor, and that this relationship would be especially strong for low Absorbers. It was found that in the prediction of violence, only screen size and Absorption made significant contributions. For the prediction of sexuality, however, an interaction showing that only low Absorbers have higher ratings of sexuality after viewing the music videos on a large screen was found. This speaks to Jensen's discussion of reception analysis, which suggests that it is the interaction between the medium and the viewer that produces different interpretations.

It is interesting to note that Absorption, experience, and screen size for low Absorbers all independently predicted perceptions of sexuality and violence. Moreover, Absorption was related to a tendency to "see" sexuality in contrast to violence. All of these findings support Jensen's theoretical framework for understanding the impact of media content on viewers.

Preston and Clair (1994) argue that different viewers use a variety of strategies to interpret a particular genre or type of media, which means that one video can be subject to many different interpretations. Morley (1980) argues that, if the same medium can produce different interpretations, it can probably also produce different effects. The results of this study provide a clear picture of the variables that interact to produce differences in interpretation. It is with this knowledge that we can pursue the study of how and why different effects of the media occur. Future research should consider other forms of media and, more importantly, other forms of impact – particularly changes in attitude and behaviour as a result of perception.

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Appendix A. Music Videos used in this study.

| | Artist | Title |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual: | | |
| | Fiona Apple | Criminal |
| | Duran Duran | Electric Barbarella |
| | Porno for Pyros | Cursed Female |
| Violent: | | |
| | Nine Inch Nails | Wish |
| | Filter & Crystal Method | (Can't you) Trip Like I Do? |
| | Nine Inch Nails | Perfect Drug |
| Neutral: | | |
| | REM | South Central Rain (I'm sorry) |
| | Amanda Marshall | Dark Horse |
| | Barney Bentall | You Should Be Havin' Fun |